

Review section

New Albums

9 pages of insight

The new Ashes trophy

WISHBONE ASH: "New England" (MCA MCG 3523). Andy Powell (guitars, mandolin and vocals), Laurie Wisefield (guitars and vocals), Martin Turner (bass and lead vocals), Steve Upton (drums). Recorded at Mart's Place, Laureledge, New England, during September, 1976. Vocals and re-mixes done at Criteria Studios, Miami. Produced by Ron Albert and Howard Albert.

THE SLEEVE hints at it; the music states it. "New England" is the beginning of a new era for Wishbone Ash, an album possibly more important than their previous acclaimed work, "Argus."

The attractive but simple cover depicts pioneers of a new, barren land sharpening a self-made spear, preparing for survival. So Ash, too, obviously see it as a new beginning. What's past is past and, as shown by the figure on the back of the sleeve, who stares at the mountains in the distance, Wishbone Ash want to forget it.

The popular theory is that it has taken Wishbone Ash Mark II (Laurie Wisefield took over from Ted Turner on lead guitar a couple of years ago) three albums to hit a peak similar to that of the original band when "Argus" was hailed as its climax. I can't really adhere to that deduction.

The predecessors to "Argus" ("Wishbone Ash" and "Pilgrimage") reflected that Ash were building to a definitive work. In contrast, the later albums, "There's The Rub" and "Locked In" were on the straight road to oblivion. "Locked In" (and, to a slightly lesser degree, "There's The Rub") portrayed a wasted and uninspired band, whereas "New England" evokes quite the opposite response. So whatever happened to Wishbone Ash to make them think so positively again has seriously happened in the latter half of this year.

Certainly, those two previous albums gave no hint of what was to come on "New England." It has all the characteristics that set the early Ash albums apart, except that there is even more attack and a lot more guts in the feel of the music.

But, as always with Ash the vocals are weak in comparison to the instrumentation. Martin Turner, despite all the help on echo from the mixing desk, is not a great vocalist and that deficiency is made all the clearer when he battles against the excellence of guitarists Andy Powell and Laurie Wisefield.

Apart from that, the weaknesses on "New England" are few. Only one track, "Lonely Island," fails to make any impact, and it's a song so laboured and tedious that I suspect the band were running out of ideas. There's also a dual guitar run on "When You Know Love," an otherwise superb and melodic tune, which is too contrived and unnatural to fit comfortably into the song's structure.

Drummer Steve Upton and Turner provide the healthy, hard-hitting rhythm foundation on which Powell and Wisefield build, and from whence they announce that Ash is still a band where guitar work is of the primary importance, an argument best supported by the raunchy and instrumental, "Outward Bound," easily the best on the album.

And to the hard rock of that track, "Mother Of Pearl" and "Runaway," there's soft and sensitive melody in "In All Of My Dreams," You Res-

cue Me," "Lorelei" and "When You Know Love," as well as another superlative instrumental, the Shadowesque "Candle Light."

But I still don't think that this Ash has fulfilled its potential on "New England." That'll come when vocals and melodies are brought up to scratch with the instrumentation. So "New England" isn't the culmination of this line-up's other two albums. It is, as the sleeve tells us, the first of a new breed. — H.D.

LYNYRD SKYNYRD: "One More From The Road" (MCA). Lynyrd Skynyrd are one of those bands who, like Rory Gallagher and Dr. Feelgood, will never be able to create the same excitement in the studio that they do on stage. But their studio albums to date have stood up well against live performances and each one has bred a classic southern boogie track. Sooner or later, I suppose, it was inevitable that someone would suggest that Skynyrd's stage set should be put down on vinyl for posterity, and, to be quite honest, I wish that that bright spark had buried the idea six foot under. Skynyrd are absolutely magnificent in front of audiences, in a class of their own. The memory of Ronnie Van Zant spouting out vocals in that broad Southern accent, or guitarist Allen Collins and Gary Rossington getting down to their break sends a shiver down my spine. And, you know what, I savour that memory, it makes



ANDY POWELL (left) and LAURIE WISEFIELD of WISHBONE ASH: "New England" is the first of a new breed in Ash albums

me look forward to the next time I'll see them. You know what, too, I've not yet heard a "live" album that's captured the atmosphere of concert. I don't think Rory Gallagher did it, or Roxy Music, or Dr. Feelgood, or David Essex, or Peter Frampton. Now I'll have to go and add Lynyrd Skynyrd, one of my favourites, to that list. I mean, it's not because they don't play well. They play the songs really well, but the heat Skynyrd generate when they play 'em isn't there. And that's my objection. I think the studio versions of "Working For MCA," "Whiskey Rock A Roller," "Sweet Home Alabama," "Free Bird" and the others on this double album are better by far, and the only way they can be surpassed is by planting me in front of a stage as part of an audience and letting me feel and hear the charisma of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Then again, maybe I've just got a downer on live albums and maybe you enjoy them. If so, this album has all you expect to hear from Skynyrd. Go get the feel on the next tour. — H.D.

CLIMAX BLUES BAND: "Gold Plated" (RCA). It is an extraordinary fact that even the most diligent rock researcher can develop a blind spot. They get quite paranoid about it. Take the case of Ace Smith, the well-known scribe. He was observed tuning into Capital with a high-powered trans-

mitter whilst on a chess and skiing holiday in Yugoslavia, simply to keep up with developments in Stikki music. "Oh, stow it, Ace!" cried his chums. "Get your skis on and come out for the next tournament." But Ace insisted he had to keep up with events, before the fast-moving pop world overtook him. I must admit that after taking a brief holiday at Jaywick Sands it took several frantic phone calls and a brace of interviews before I had fully grasped the significance of the rise of the Rockin' Berries at the expense of the Swinging Blue Jeans. Thus, I must admit that over the years I have given Climax Blues Band less attention than they deserve, simply because I was under the impression they were a hangover from the old John Mayall-Fleetwood Mac-Chicken Shack Blues syndrome, of which there was a surfeit during the Sixties. There is some slight excuse for missing out on the rewards of Climax music. They have worked extensively in America over the last few years, where they have toured to such an extent, many were convinced they were residents of the USA. In fact they come from Stafford, and dropped the "Chicago" from the banner under which they advanced many moons ago. Climax today are a musicianly combo with twin armaments in the shape of Peter Haycock and Colin Cooper, guitarist and

saxophonist sans pareil. The blend of tenor and sax gives Climax its distinctive tonal quality, and the good taste they eschew puts them outside the usual run of heavy-metal exponents, or stereotyped funk bands. That is not to say they lack power. But with John Cuffley's subtle backbeat drumming, they develop a lift and swing to their performances that is very American, and very refreshing. The band are currently enjoying their first full-scale British tour, and to add to the buzz about Climax, they have gained a hit single with "Couldn't Get It Right," which opens side two of the album. It's nice to think a good old British band can still cause a stir in this age of musical banditry and perplexity. And one of the pleasures of Climax lies in the exceptional guitar playing of Peter Haycock, whose lead lines weave such a melodic, yet blues-drenched spell in the Clapton-ish "Mighty Fire." It's one of those songs that stick in the mind for days after an initial playing, and closer examination reveals the tight interplay between Derek Holt's intelligent bass lines, Peter's inherently sincere guitar work, and the gruff answering choruses from Colin Cooper. Haycock's solo work on "Mighty Fire," is some of the best British blues guitar heard in years, and notice also the clever use of vocal harmonies with a wide range, from bass to

soprano, brought into play. When it comes to slow, easy, rocking riffs Climax are past masters, as displayed on the work song "Chasing Change." Perhaps it's not a legit. field holler, but it has some of the structure and feel of a call-and-response traditional blues, before it develops into a modern soul workout, for Colin's tenor. Dig the bass and drum teamwork, which rocks without bashing. When it comes to memorable themes, "Together And Free" is a killer, with a nice line in choppy eight-beats-to-the-bar bass guitar, behind Peter's panic stricken guitar riffs. Colin takes a singing alto sax break, before Pierre returns to wail. "Berlin Blues," gives Richard Jones space to play boogie piano, and "Couldn't Get It Right" is notable for the cool, casual approach to the beat, and sensuous lead vocals. Climax palpably get it right with this heart-warming selection which grows in stature with repeated plays. One of the highlights for me is the surging "Rollin' Home" with Peter's vocals and guitar reaching out for the sun. It has more feeling and emotion packed into three minutes than one might expect to find in a boxed set of heavy metal guff. The music business should be grateful bands like Climax are clinging to their beliefs, and making it. The public needn't worry, because they have long ago turned onto them in droves. — C.W.

CATE BROS.: "In One Eye And Out The Other" (Asylum). Last year the debut album of twins Ernie and Earl Cate came as a pleasant surprise. They sounded mature players (Earl's guitar work was especially impressive as well as being good singers and writers). That album was produced by Steve Cropper and so is their second, on which the Cate Bros. have softened and geared their style towards the blander pastures of the Average White Band. This has not turned out to be such a disastrous move, mainly because of their consistent writing ability and the deft musicianship of Ed Green (drums), Scott Edwards, Duck Dunn (bass), Cropper and Earl Cate (guitars), Ernie on sweet keyboards, and Jim Horn on occasional sax solo. The title cut is like a fast AWB track, "Can't Stop" veers towards that band's best ballad work, and "Stuck In Chicago" is an R & B ballad, which (and here I'm willing to stake next month's pay cheque) is going to be covered by several discerning black artists (Joe Simon springs immediately to mind). The hit single off "Cate Bros" was "Union Man," a

furious, exciting track, and though it doesn't have a genuine equivalent here, "Travellin' Man," with its powerful horn arrangement, is close. "Music Making Machine" is a weary-of-the-road song, but with the fresh observation of the little lady left behind at home with the dishes to wash and the groceries to buy ("That 737/Sure looks like heaven/When you're coming home to me"). "I Don't Want Nobody (Standing Over Me)" is a good example of where "In One Eye" disappoints. It's a spirited song of rebellion, yet the basic mood of the track is self-satisfaction, which totally belies the mood of the lyric. If, perhaps, it had been given the pace and verve of "Where Can We Go" (albeit a rather hackneyed arrangement, including a bare-faced pinch from a Diana Ross & the Supremes' Sixties hit), it would've been far more satisfactory. Despite its lack of adventure and failure to improve on the previous Cate Bros offering, "In One Eye And Out The Other" is just about good enough to maintain one's belief that in them white R & B and soul has discovered new writing and recording talent. The third album will be the test. — G.B.

JERRY BUTLER: "Make It Easy On Yourself"; BETTY EVERETT: "It's In His Kiss" (both DJM). First, the Jerry Butler album is a double 28 tracks — seven a side — harking way back to '59 and moving up to '65. Jerry, The Ice Man, was the first lead singer with the Impressions, pre-dating the wonderful Curtis Mayfield and the tracks pulled together here are from his days at Vee Jay — ostensibly some of his most artistically fulfilling days as a recording artist. Contemporaneously, you may've got into his latest Motown work. Sleek as it is, here's where the cold, sharp perspective of Butler's singing began. The Betty Everett set is as indispensable as Butler's. Again taken from old Vee Jay tapes, Betty's album, a 16-track single, features her best-known hit "It's In His Kiss" ("The Shoop Shoop Song") plus her inimitable version of "You're No Good" along with "Getting Mighty Crowded" (written, incidentally, by Mr Disco '76 Van McCoy), "I Can't Hear You" right up to "Trouble Over The Weekend." The two albums are for discerning collectors only, perhaps, but that shouldn't dissuade the general collector from investigating both of these valuable LPs as fine examples of early Sixties uptown R & B. — G.B.